

Maybe Someday by darthstormer

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Summary: "Papa doesn't need to know," thought Eleven. It had only been an accident that she even discovered her newest ability, and really, it was only an extension of what she could already do. At least, that's what she told herself. She knew if Papa found out what she was doing, he would be very angry and she would be put in the dark room again.

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"Papa doesn't need to know," thought Eleven. It had only been an accident that she even discovered her newest ability, and really, it was only an extension of what she could already do. At least, that's what she told herself. She knew if Papa found out what she was doing, he would be very angry and she would be put in the dark room again.

It had all started just after her 11th birthday. At least, she was pretty sure that's how old she was; she had only managed to see the chart at her annual checkup with the doctor for a few seconds, when he set it down to grab a tongue depressor. Papa had taught her to be observant of every little detail when she sent her mind out to find people for him and it was a hard thing to stop doing when she was back in the lab. In any case, it was about a week after the checkup that she got an idea while laying in bed at the end of another long day.

Papa had put her through lots of tests, finding people in the lab, using a photograph. More recently, he had started putting her in the bath, to find people much farther away. The bath scared her; it was dark and small and uncomfortably quiet. The idea of being locked in with all that water terrified her, but Papa said the things she did were really important and that no-one else was special like her; she was the only one that could find the people whose pictures he showed her.

After an afternoon in the bath, Eleven lay in her bed, shivering under a double layer of blankets. Whenever she went out searching from the bath, she came back feeling cold and empty and took forever to feel warm again. The metal tray with her dinner sat untouched on her desk; she was hungry, but at the same time, the idea of eating made her stomach feel all twisty. As she lay there huddled under the blankets with her knees pulled up tight to her chest, she wondered if it would be possible to find people outside the lab on her own. If she could practice and get really good at it, she could show Papa and

maybe he wouldn't make her go in the tank of water any more.

The thought made her feel a little better so she started planning how she would go about it. It would be hard - she knew that already - so she would have to try it on a day that Papa didn't already make her search from the bath or do any of the other tests that made her tired. She would need time to practice and settled on dinner. While the other parts of her schedule could change from day to day, dinner was always the same; they would bring her food and then come back two hours later to pick up the tray and take her down the hall to use the bathroom before bed. That gave her time to eat and practice uninterrupted, but there was still another problem. Papa always gave her a picture of the person she was supposed to find. She lay there and puzzled over how she would find people outside the lab when she didn't know anyone outside.

She was still working on that problem when the woman came to pick up her tray and take her down to the bathroom. Eleven didn't know her name, but the woman was always nice to her, especially on days like this one where her dinner sat untouched.

"Not hungry today?" she softly asked, as she picked up the tray and noticed Eleven hadn't eaten anything.

Eleven shrugged and shook her head as she stood up and walked out into the hall. Halfway to the bathroom, an idea struck her as she followed behind the nice woman. She DID know people outside the lab. She had overheard some of Papa's assistants a few times, talking about what they were doing after work, or on the upcoming weekend. It made perfect sense, the workers didn't live at the lab like she did, so maybe she could find one of them when they went home. She wasn't sure how far away they might live, but anything outside the lab would be a start.

It took a few days before the conditions were right to try out her idea. Papa was sending her on long searches in the bath everyday, following the same man speaking words she didn't understand. Finally, she was granted a day to rest while Papa handled some business away from the lab, through she still didn't know who she should follow. She decided to seek out the man who brought her dinner since he had mentioned before that the delivery was his last

task before going home for the night. As he entered her room and set the tray on her desk, she sat quietly on the bed and stared hard at his face, committing every little detail to memory. Anxious to get out of the lab for the night, he took no notice of how closely she was watching and turned to leave the room, closing the heavy metal door behind him.

Shutting her eyes and concentrating hard on his face, she sought him out in the void. It took a few minutes, but she soon found him. He had changed clothes and was no longer wearing the usual white uniform of the lab. Instead, he was wearing a bright red shirt and blue pants. She watched as he walked out of the familiar white hallways she knew so well, and entered one she had never seen before with dark wood walls and doors. The people were different too, more friendly looking and not everyone wore the white lab clothes. As she continued to watch, he walked out of the hallway and across a brightly lit room to a set of glass doors that led outside. She followed as long as she could, as he made his way passed many parked cars until he found his own, got it and began to drive away.

As he neared the gate around the lab, the effort began to be too much and she felt herself slip away. Opening her eyes, she found herself back inside her little room, still inside the lab where she belonged. She hadn't made it very far on this first try, but she had still made it outside and she was overjoyed. The success actually brought a smile to her lips, a movement that felt strange and unfamiliar on her cheeks; she didn't often find much to smile about but this certainly warranted one. Her joy turned to panic as she felt the all-to-familiar tickle under her nose; the blood, she had forgotten about the blood. She looked around quickly but there was nothing in her room to wipe her nose with that wouldn't be stained and her secret discovered. Papa had warned her many times that she was never to use her powers, under any circumstances, unless he directed her to do so. Looking around again, she had an idea. She grabbed one of the tissues from the box next to her bed and wiped up the blood. For good measure, she licked her thumb and wiped it above her lip just to be sure no trace of red was left, then she folded the tissue up. She knew if she left it in her wastebasket, it would be discovered as soon as they emptied it. Instead, she took a second tissue, carefully folded it around the first, and tucked the tiny package into the waistband of

her underwear. In a couple hours, the nice woman would take her down to the bathroom and she would be able to flush it then.

Satisfied with her progress and more than a little pleased with her own cunning, she sat down at her desk to eat her dinner. Unlike her evenings after the bath, spent cold and hollow, Eleven felt hungry and energized and ready to take on the world. Over the next few weeks, she had several more opportunities to follow the man who brought her dinner. Each time she made it further than the time before, and eventually, she managed to follow him all the way home where she watched him open a can from his refrigerator, take a very long drink and plop down in a old, worn chair to watch television. Every time she brought herself back to the reality of her room, she was exhausted by the effort, but still felt worlds better than when she returned from the bath. She knew she had proven to herself that she could reach much further than Papa had originally thought without the aid of the bath, but she still wasn't sure she could demonstrate enough to convince him. At the same time, it sparked a special feeling inside her she had never felt before, to have this secret thing in her life that was just for her.

After a full week of trips in the bath, one time twice in the same day, Papa finally granted her a day of rest. As much as she knew she should take full advantage of the rest, Eleven was eager to try again with her own journeys outside the lab. To fully prove herself to Papa, she would eventually have to find someone away from the lab without following them first. She knew the routines of the various people who came in and out of her room each day. For example, the nice woman who picked up her tray and took her to the bathroom each night came for five days and then the angry man with long gray hair would come for two days, before the nice woman came back for another five. Today was the second night that the angry man would come so she knew the nice woman was somewhere out in the world doing whatever people did on days they didn't work.

Once her dinner was delivered, Eleven settled quietly on her bed and sent her mind into the void, thinking hard about every detail of the nice woman's face. It took much longer to find her than when she started out following someone while they were still in the lab, and she was about to give up, when the nice woman suddenly came into

focus. She was so overjoyed at her success she almost lost the connection. Eleven calmed her breathing and focused on her again, trying to gather her surroundings. She was walking, somewhere indoors, pushing a metal basket with wheels. It was very bright, and for a moment Eleven thought she might be at the lab after all. As she looked around, she realized the woman was walking up and down rows of shelves of boxes and bags and cans. Sometimes a nice woman would stop and pick up an item from the shelf and look it over, before either placing it in her basket or putting it back on the shelf. Eleven was fascinated, straining hard to figure out just what she was doing. It suddenly came to her as the woman picked up a can with a picture of green beans on the label. She recognized the vegetable that often came on her dinner tray. The nice woman must be buying food for her own meals at home.

Pleased with her deductive skills, Eleven finally took notice of other people who were also in this place, getting food for their own homes. There were lots of people, nice people all smiling and saying nice things to each other. She wasn't used to nice people; there were very few nice people in the lab and most people never spoke to her at all. Papa would get angry if people said too many things to her; he said it was distracting her from the important things she was doing. These people seemed to be doing just fine saying friendly things to each other while they picked out their foods. She realized there were also children - real children - with some of the grownups. She had never seen another child, though Papa had explained to her that most children live in homes with their mama and papa. She was different though - special - and the very special things she could do meant that she got to live in the lab so she could do the very important things Papa told her to do.

Eleven hung on as long as she could, much longer than was probably safe, just watching the nice woman pick out her foods and speak to the other people picking out their own foods. Finally, she reluctantly let herself return to her room. A strange new feeling took hold as she thought about what she had seen. The world wasn't quite as Papa had explained it to her. When he spoke about the world outside, he described most people as vicious and evil, trying to hurt each other. It made her happy that she was able to help him to bring the bad people to a stop. Now, as she thought about the people she had seen,

she wondered just how many of these bad people there really were. Everyone she had seen seemed friendly and happy, even the children. It gave her a new sense of hope; maybe if there weren't too many of the bad people, she could help Papa stop them all. Then, someday, maybe Papa would let her go out and meet the nice people for herself.

As she lay in bed that night, she knew already she wanted to go back; to follow the nice woman while she bought food. Eleven counted down the seven days and hoped the nice woman followed the same schedule for when she went out. As soon as her dinner was dropped off, she settled onto the bed and closed her eyes, pushing herself out into the void to find her. She was disappointed at first to find the woman driving her car through the quiet streets of a small town. She considered coming right back to the lab and try again another time, but decided to wait a little longer and look around at the houses and buildings she was driving past. Her patience was rewarded when the woman parked her car and walked into a building with glass doors that opened and closed on their own as she approached. Eleven immediately recognized the building as the place she had visited last time. Walking the rows together, Eleven looked around in wonder, taking in the smiling faces around her.

Entering another row, she found there was a mother and her son picking out what Eleven recognized as spaghetti noodles. The mother looked up and smiled as they rounded the corner.

"Cheryl, how are you? I haven't seen you in ages," the mother greeted.

"Karen, good to see you. They have me working nights now, and through the weekend, so Tuesdays are my grocery night now," the nice woman replied.

Eleven smiled; she knew the nice woman's name now: Cheryl. She could never call her that, of course. Papa was very strict about never using names in the lab, but it still made her happy to know her name. As the women stood and talked, Eleven found her eyes drawn to the boy waiting patiently beside the basket. For just a moment, she could have sworn he look as though he had seen her, but she knew that wasn't possible. Papa had reminded her many times that no one could

see her when she found them in the void. Sure enough, his eyes soon wandered over to the colorful boxes on the shelves while he waited for his mother to finish chatting.

Eleven took the opportunity to get a closer look at the boy. She couldn't explain it, but there was something about his face that drew her in like a magnet. He looked like he was about her height, so she guessed they were the same age. Dark brown hair covered the top of his head and fell down over his ears, framing his face. Inquisitive brown eyes stared out from pale skin and his nose and cheeks were dotted with tiny reddish-brown specs. She took another step toward him, tracing every detail with her eyes, committing him to memory. Only when his mother spoke again did she snap out of the trance that held her.

"Michael, red sauce or white?" she asked, holding a jar of sauce in each hand.

Eleven looked around, startled to realize that the nice woman - Cheryl she reminded herself - was suddenly nowhere to be seen. Somehow, her focus had jumped from her to the boy, Michael. Her thoughts began to race and she found her mind tumbling away from the void and back to her room. Her heart was pounding and her nose was bleeding more than usual as she sat there, contemplating the implications of what had just happened. Not only could she find people outside the lab without the bath, she could move her focus from one person to another without coming back first. Papa needed to know about these new things she could do, and just maybe, she wouldn't have to go in the bath anymore. "Or does he," she thought. She knew he would be proud of her, and she might be right about the bath. But he would also find ways to make sure she didn't use her new ability unless he told her it was okay first. She thought about the boy and the power that seemed to draw her to him, and she knew immediately she was going to find him again.

Over the next few weeks, she reached out and found the boy - Michael - several times. Twice he was having dinner with his family: his mother and father and also two girls, one older and one younger. As the family talked, he always had a distant look on his face; not sad, exactly, just lost in thought. She found herself wondering just what the nice, quiet boy thought about. Other times, she found him

in a big room at the bottom of a set of stairs. He sat at a table with books spread out and alternated between flipping through the countless pages and feverishly writing down words on pages of lined paper secured into a binder. She had no idea what he was working on but she watched him all the same, fascinated at his look of concentration as he read and then the proud look of accomplishment that would wash over him as he suddenly turned to the binder and began to write. Another time, she was surprised to find he wasn't alone at the table. This time, three other boys sat around the table with him, playing some kind of game that involved all the things he had been working so hard on writing. They used lots of words she didn't understand as they played - paladin, bard, troll, wizard, knight, fireball - she wished so badly to understand their game, but she knew there was no-one she could ask. So she stood there and contented herself to watch the boys play, her eyes always finding their way back to Michael, or Mike as the others called him.

She wasn't sure how one person could have different names, but then, the more she watched, the more things she found she didn't understand. Something deep inside told her that Michael would happily explain all the words to her and that thought made her smile. Maybe someday, when all the bad people were gone, Papa would let her meet him for real. It was a thought she would turn to when she was tired, or sad, or scared and it made her feel just a little better. Maybe someday.

A few days after watching the game, things went from bad to worse for Eleven. Papa started sending her on multiple journeys in the bath each day, tracking down different people each time. As always she used her thoughts to send the things they were saying back to Papa and his men to record. After six days in a row, Eleven was exhausted and having trouble focusing on the photograph Papa handed her; the man to find on her latest mission. He explained it was very important to find him, as fast as possible, because he was planning something that could kill many people. Eleven knew she had to find the man, but the photo was blurry and taken from very far away. She stood there on trembling knees as the men lowered her into the tank of water, placing the helmet on her head moments before she sank below the surface. She tried for a long time to find the man but she just couldn't pull him out of the void. Finally, she opened her eyes

and spoke, knowing Papa was listening in the control room.

"Papa, I can't find him," she said, terrified of the punishment she was sure to receive for being bad.

"You're not trying hard enough, Eleven," he responded in her helmet, calm but firm.

She shut her eyes, though the tank was already pitch black, and pushed out again. She had never had this much trouble finding someone for him before, but the photo was so blurry, it could have been many people. With no sense of time inside the dark water, she wasn't sure if it had been minutes or hours, but when she still couldn't find the man, she reported her failure once more to Papa. For almost a minute, he didn't respond and she began to worry he couldn't hear her. Without warning, he threw open the shutter that covered the front of the tank. She slammed her eyes shut against the sudden blinding light; normally he gave her warning before letting the light in. As she tentatively opened them again, she could just make out Papa standing outside the tank, a look of disappointed anger plastered hard across his face. He slammed one hand hard against the side of the tank, pinning the photograph against the glass.

"Find him," he ordered. She couldn't hear the words, but his expression told her all she needed to know.

Meekly she nodded inside her helmet and leaned forward to study the photograph one more time. Try as she might, she still couldn't get any better image in her mind of the man she was supposed to find. All too soon, Papa slammed the shutter closed, leaving her in darkness once again. She knew she had to find the man this time or she would be in a lot of trouble. She pushed her mind harder than she ever had before and soon she could feel the familiar tickle of blood running from her nose. Soon it was pouring freely from both nostrils as she searched. She forced her lips tightly closed to keep out the salty, metallic taste. When she could not search any longer, she opened her eyes in the dark.

"I'm sorry Papa. I can't find him," she whispered into her helmet, tears beginning to break free and roll down her cheeks. She knew she wasn't supposed to cry - not outside her room - but she just couldn't

help it. "Please, I'm so sorry. I'm so....so tired."

He didn't respond to her, but over the helmet's speaker she could hear him order his men to get her out of the tank and take her back to her room. She was relieved he wasn't throwing her in the dark room like he usually did when she was bad, but she could still hear the anger in his voice. She was lifted quickly out of the tank and marched back to her room, not even pausing long enough to give her a towel to wrap herself against the cold in the hallways. Fortunately there were towels in her room, which she grabbed from the little shelf where they were stacked, as the heavy metal door slammed shut behind her. Although she wanted nothing more than to climb into bed, she took the time to hang her floaty-suit neatly back in the metal cabinet in her room and pull on a clean gown. She was already in enough trouble and things would only be worse if Papa found her room messy too.

Laying down, she pulled the double blankets over her tiny, trembling frame and hugged her stuffed lion tightly to her chest. A few minutes later, her dinner was brought in and left on her desk, though she already knew she wasn't going to touch a bite of it; there was only one thing she wanted right then. She was so tired and knew it might not even work, but she shut her eyes and thought of her dark-haired boy. After trying so hard to find the man for Papa, a flood of relief washed over her as Michael came into focus almost immediately. He was alone, in the room at the bottom of the stairs, curled up on a soft chair that looked wide enough for three or four people. He had a blanket wrapped around him and a book open in his lap. The whole scene looked so warm and quiet and comforting, her heart ached to be there as fresh tears began to slide slowly down her cheeks. She could only hold the connection for a minute before exhaustion overtook her and her mind tumbled back into her cold, clean room. She was so tired, all she wanted to do was sleep. She quickly dabbed away the blood from under her nose and dropped the tissue in her trash as she lay back down and closed her eyes.

"Time for the bathroom," said a gruff voice as a firm hand shook her shoulder several hours later.

She had lost track of the days and forgotten today it would be the angry man with the gray hair who would come. Rising sleepily from

her bed, she followed him down the hall, used the bathroom and stumbled her way back to her room, barely managing to pull the blankets over her before she was fast asleep once more. In the morning, another man brought her tray of breakfast and walked her down to the bathroom. As she reached out to pull open the door to her room, she was puzzled as the man escorting her continued down the hallway without making sure she was locked back in. As the door swung open, she was startled to find Papa there, sitting on the edge of her bed. Held in one hand was a tissue, dark with blood long dried. She realized with a sinking horror it was the tissue she had carelessly dropped in the garbage the night before; in her exhaustion she had forgotten to hide it away and flush it when she used the bathroom.

"Papa, I'm sorry. I..." she began, before he raised a hand and silenced her.

"I've warned you about using your abilities without my permission. Is this why you couldn't find the man yesterday? Have you been overusing your power?" he asked, the anger simmering in his voice.

She knew there was no excuse, at least none that he would accept. "I'm sorry," she whispered, hanging her head in shame.

"You've been bad, and you're going to have to be punished," he said calmly.

As if on cue, two men entered the room behind her and picked her up by the arms. She knew where they were taking her, and she knew it was no use but still she struggled to get free. "Please Papa, I'm sorry," she cried as they carried her away. "Papa, please don't make me go back."

The next day when she was finally let out of the dark room and allowed to go back to her room, she found most things had been removed. The tissues and garbage can, her extra blanket, her coloring book and crayons, all were gone. Inside her metal cabinet, only the floaty-suit, one clean gown and two pairs of underwear remained. In the corner near the ceiling, a camera had been added, its harsh red light alerting her to the fact that Papa was now watching her at all times.

Something changed in Eleven's mind right then and there, as she slowly turned and surveyed her small space. There were only three things in the world she had considered hers: her lion, the quiet sanctuary of her room and most recently her ability to send her mind out into the world. With the drop of a tissue, she had lost the two she held most precious. She was grateful her lion was still sitting where she always left it on her bed, but it didn't fill the hole left by the other two. She resolved right then and there, that she would not stay in the lab. She would have to wait until the time was right, and wait patiently for an opening, but if Papa was going to take the world away from her, she was going to go out and get it for herself. She was going to go and find her dark-haired boy and let him explain all the words she didn't understand. It might not be soon, but someday.

Eleven walked with purpose, minutes from going into shock. Her mind raced as she tried to come to terms with everything that was happening. She was pretty sure Papa and his men were no longer following behind her through the woods. She was pretty sure the nice man who gave her the burger was dead. She was pretty sure Papa and his men were the real bad people she had thought she was supposed to be saving the world from. As the rain began to fall and soak through the thin yellow shirt she was wearing, she knew where she had to go. She didn't know how or where, or what she would say, but she had to find her dark-haired boy; she needed to find Michael.

Suddenly, she froze in her tracks as she heard nearby voices and spotted the beams of flashlights.